An OU English professor has earned a national reputation for his landscape designs.

by Kathryn Jenson White

How do his Gardens Grow?

In the Kingdom of Nature Lovers, the genus *Groundstender* contains two species: *G. gardeners* and *G. garden designers*. Professor of English and adjunct professor of architecture James Yoch is a member of the latter species.

"Those who are aficionados of gardens represent a great range of interests," Yoch says. "Some have affection for the individual plant, the rose well raised, but I'm not so much interested in individuals. I think there should be a few heroes in a garden, but, in general, plants are the background for human activities—sitting on a lovely bench reading a good book or sharing a glass of wine with a friend. Those are the big events for which gardens provide the setting; keeping a collection of plants isn't important for most people."

A conversation with Yoch reveals quickly that he is no garden variety gardener. His references to striking plants as "heroes," to a variegated leaf ginger as a "tiger in the garden" and to garden spaces as "memory theaters" make it clear that his love for and understanding of all things botanical are passion, not pastime, heartfelt, not hobby.

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Yoch combines his love of plant art with his knowledge of word art to teach a course called "Literature and Landscape" and a capstone course, "Rural Pleasures: Country Life in Art and Literature" in the Department of English, where he specializes in Shakespeare and the Renaissance. He also has taught "History of Landscape Architecture" in the College of Architecture and "English Renaissance Landscape, Literature and Economics" in the University’s Oxford Program. In addition, he and associate Timothy Scott work together at The Garden Studio, from which they design gardens ranging from courtyards to many acres for individuals, companies and universities.

Yoch’s understanding of gardening as both a grounded experience causing dirty hands and an elevated one resulting in artistic expression also has led him to design garden exhibitions at museums. At the Decorative Arts Study Center in California, he and Scott have created historic landscapes, including "An 18th-Century Folly Garden" and "A Dutch Town Garden, circa 1689." At the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, he was co-curator in 1992 of the exhibition "Personal Edens: The Gardens and Film Sets of Florence Yoch."

The name in the title of the Huntington exhibition is significant. Florence Yoch, a renowned California landscape architect, was Jim Yoch’s cousin. In 1989, he published a book titled Landscaping the American Dream: The Gardens and Film Sets of Florence Yoch, 1890-1972.

"I learned a lot from writing the book about Florence Yoch," he says. "She did about 250 gardens in California and five movies, including Tara in Gone With the Wind. Her ideas have had a great influence on me, but I was interested in garden design long before I met her."

"As a child in St. Louis, I volunteered to work for nothing in the botanical gardens. My parents built a new home, and my father encouraged me to lay out the garden even though I was only 13. Armed with a lawnmower, I learned from the people I worked for. I'd begin by cutting their grass; then, when they would go away, they would ask me to take care of the garden and make changes in its layout."

As he went to college at Notre Dame and graduate school at Princeton, Yoch developed a network of friends of like mind.

"We were all interested in gardens and architecture and in making something beautiful, not just doing the sweepy, swirly multiflowered ordinary thing that is customary," he recalls. "Our gardens have a historic character and are also artistic. Ideally, the paths all make a unified rhythm of spaces, and the spaces are harmonic. The gardens I design are not primarily flower gardens; much more important and enduring than colorful blooms are the rhythm of the spaces and the proportion."

Working on his doctorate in English, Yoch spent much of his time in Princeton's library, but he also found time to visit its wonderful gardens. The seeds of his love for artfully designed natural places quickly sprouted.

"I visited the gardens of Europe for the first time in my 20s," he recalls. "On my first trips I really went to see everything, but gradually I've come to focus primarily on visiting the gardens. I've been to Paris many times but inside Notre Dame only once; however, I visit Versailles every time to see the gardens."

Those who wish to see a garden by Yoch can do so in Maine, Washington, Michigan, Texas, Oklahoma, North Carolina, California and Mexico, to name a few of the sites of his sowing. At each place, the process of shaping nature into living art begins with the people who will live in the space.

In accepting a commission, "I fol-
low Florence Yoch’s approach,” Yoch says. “She never did a garden for anyone who was not recommended to her by a previous client. I just finished a garden for a family for whom I did a first garden in 1980. I’ve done several for them since then. For each project, I hope to establish a relationship that develops and evolves with the garden itself.

“The joy is the people, as I see it. I come to understand them and what they care about and help them express themselves in the landscape. Our clients see gardens as a way of arranging things that matter to them: serenity, harmony with nature, their pasts. The best gardens, like the best people, have a little eccentricity to them. They’re not totally understandable.”

Yoch has a bouquet of charming stories about his clients: the witty one who wanted a garden that would look as if “it belonged to someone who had been to Paris about 1680 and then came back to the country misremembering what he had seen”; the historical one who bought a Georgian house built around 1915 in Los Angeles and wanted a garden with only plants that would have been available in England when that house would have been built there; the literary ones who were fond of Petrarch and, after visiting places in which he had lived and to which he had traveled, wanted a garden that “felt like 1350”;

when people happen upon them. As he plants and searches and reads and sketches lovely architectural plans for his plots, Yoch always is engaged in the gardening activity he says is the most important: listening.

“We design gardens based on the historical vocabulary of the site, the demands of the space and the personalities of the owners,” he says. “Because people are always different, the gardens must be different if people are to be comfortable. If you listen to what people say, they will inspire the garden. Because they often have only a vague impression of what they want, I listen intently.”

Of late, Yoch has been listening intently to President and Mrs. David Boren and others on campus as they restore and enhance the University grounds. His first major undertaking was a parterre garden in front of Evans Hall.

“We wanted to do a garden appropriate to the Cherokee Gothic style of the building,” Yoch says. “It needed a garden that was in scale with it but that didn’t compete with it. I wanted to echo some of the building’s forms in the garden design, so, for example, the urns have trefoils in them to echo those in the architecture.

“The building also needed a quiet base, so I put the box hedge there to give a steady green line. I wanted it to look serene, and when you look at it from a distance, the building seems to rest on a verdant foundation.

“There are also occasional heroes: the hollies and spruces that rise up, the urns with flowers in them, the tall crepe myrtles and the roses that cascade flowers over the front.”

Yoch credits his cousin with influencing this design style, which follows historical tradition but is always open to the unexpected that adds interest to the plot.

“Florence Yoch in the 1920s and 1930s introduced a sense of the impromptu in classical design,” he says. “Her gardens of that period are sym-

Tim Scott, left, and OU English professor Jim Yoch fine tune landscape plans for the gardens that will be the exterior focus of the completely renovated Boyd House, future home of President and Mrs. David Boren.
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metrical, but they have whimsy. After all, you've got to relax sometimes.

"That's why the single French urn is on the west side in front of Evans Hall. It serves a practical function, of course, but it also throws the perfect symmetry of the building slightly out of kilter. That's why I like that great elm tree by the door, too. It's off center and keeps the picture from being too neatly balanced. Tensions keep the scene dynamic; the imperfection puts us in touch with the mortality of things."

Yoch's designs are rooted in his knowledge of venerable principles and theories, and he can spend anywhere from three months to several years on a project. However, he doesn't necessarily expect those who experience the flower of his labor to think about his creative investment.

"People are, in general, fairly sophisticated about gardens," he says. "There is a lot of literature about them, and they are in the vocabulary of the other arts. Some scholars of literature and history argue that gardens are among the best 'speaking pictures'—they often have poems and other explicit messages strewn about—in which to find cultural issues assembled. Thus, to study a garden is to study the literature, the personalities, the history of the time.

"They make a good argument for that, but I don't think the garden has consciously to bear all that meaning. It could simply be pretty. Sometimes, the landscape is best when it complements in a nonassertive way. That's what I aimed for with the Evans Hall parterre. The garden doesn't have to scream out, 'Look at me!' It can quietly honor the building and leave room for flourishes of color, such as the splendid crepe myrtles and robust roses the OU Landscape Department planted beautifully."

Ultimately, Yoch says, it is satisfying that those who stroll through his

TOP: In this garden outside Detroit, stone columns surmounted by an old barn beam frame windows of flowers in a border of silver, blue, pink and white. Climbing roses, some from nurseries in Thailand and India, garland the stone.

ABOVE: In Cuernavaca, Mexico, a set of curving stairs, 84 in all, leads in a formal procession from the house down to the pool through lush tropical growth. All the plants in this Yoch-designed garden bear edible fruits.
At this Southern California villa, an antique wall fountain and gate enliven a wall that gives way for a sycamore tree, emblem of nature's great creating power. The stone terrace, seemingly centuries old, was imported from Oklahoma.

Yoch knows that. He also knows that for every lover of the green who passes by the carefully planned spaces, there will be many who can't tell a forsythia from an acanthus. "I'm pleased when people say nice things about Evans Hall or any garden we design," he says. "However, they don't have to be able to articulate their response; it's just not necessary. You can go to the ballet and not have the vocabulary to talk about the dance but still come away glad to have been there and full of new ideas. When gardens feel right, that's quite enough."

Yoch does not just sit around watching his grass grow or thinking about how people feel when they walk across it. His work on commissions for personal and public gardens across the country contributes to his teaching and scholarship, which includes studies of Renaissance English garden islands in Shakespeare's Tempest, courtly plays and retreats in 1570 Ferrara and plants in Cymbeline. An English press has commissioned him to prepare a Dictionary of Shakespearean Plants and Gardens.

He recently presented a paper in California titled "Italian Villas in the American Scene: from Monticello to Tara," in which he explores the way Americans have reinterpreted the design of the villa. Yoch has designed gardens for many villas in the United States and has written A Guide to Villa Philbrook and its Gardens, one volume of a beautiful two-volume boxed set on the Tulsa museum's collections and grounds.

His publications study the relationship of gardens to the owner's personality, power and larger cultural issues. These studies have led to national and international invitations to lecture, including the Scripps Humanities Symposium, the American Horticultural Society and the New York Botanical Garden as well as in conferences at universities in Zurich, Ottawa and Lund, Sweden.

With his books and papers, Yoch leaves a permanent heritage of insights into the art of gardening for those who come after. Because the nature of nature is change, his gardens are not quite as permanent. Rather than worrying him, the fact...
At Nancy and Jim Yoch’s home, snow lights up the boxwood parterre and axial walk. Along the way is a Gothic pedestal rescued from the ruins of the Women’s Building, which once stood just west of the library on OU’s Norman campus.

That what he has wrought is always changing excites him.

“A woman in Charleston had a garden that was much published and quite famous,” he says. “Then Hurricane Hugo simply removed it. She was in her 80s, and her friends thought they had to console her for her loss. ‘Oh, no,’ she told them. ‘It’s a chance to begin again.' To me, that’s the perfect response.

“I leave instructions for care when I finish a garden, and I go back to visit. But gardens are always changing shape, growing out of bounds or becoming too shady here and there. A garden doesn’t have to be what it was originally. It may change for the better, in fact, with the gifts of nature.”

Yoch believes that novelist Edith Wharton had it right when she said that harmony, coherence and comfort are virtues. He finds those virtues thrive in good garden settings.

“Gardens become more and more important as the American way of life becomes increasingly frenzied,” he says. “Serenity in a garden, a place to get away from it all. That’s important.”

Whether providing an oasis of serenity and order in a chaotic world, honoring a building, soothing the soul of someone experiencing pain or acting as a pleasant setting for human events great and small, Yoch’s gardens are gifts of art in nature.

Antique roses bloom along the walls and overhead on arches in the Yochs’ garden. They include, on the right, “Cornelia” and “Golden Showers,” and, on the left, “Lawrence Johnston” (named for the American who designed Hidcote Manor Garden) and “Fred Loads.”